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ABSTRACT

In fall 1975, a project was undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of the PBS television course "Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama" in terms of: (1) the attitude toward and utilization of course materials and prescribed format by participating institutions (153 two-year, and 122 four-year) nationwide; (2) the response to the course by students and the extent to which the course reached a population not previously involved in higher education; (3) the extent of further interest in this mode of humanities presentation. This document reports the progress which has been made on this evaluation. Information from participating institutions is being gathered by administering questionnaires to faculty and administrators, and by making site visits to selected schools. Information from students is being gathered by administering a questionnaire which requests their reaction to the various course components, and the administration of the course. Design and delivery evolution of the course is described, and a preliminary analysis of the survey is presented here, which indicates the considerable diversity in local patterns of utilization of the curriculum. (Author/NHM)

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"A NATIONAL TELEVISION COURSE: EXPOSING THE PROCESS"

Paper presented at the Open Learning Conference
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by

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This paper draws on the design and findings of a research project made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Findings and conclusions here reported do not necessarily represent the view of the Endowment.

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Among the many forms of nontraditional study that have appeared in the last few years, courses designed around national television series have become quite prominent. Yet they are not very well understood. The prominence comes in part from the high profile of the television series themselves. Everyone has heard of The Ascent of Man, Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama, and The Adams Chronicles because they were aired nationwide over public television stations with national promotional efforts. But the arrangements that constituted a college-level course around these series remain somewhat confusing even for the hundreds of higher education institutions granting students credit for taking the courses. The lack of any comprehensive studies on these courses also explains the general lack of understanding of what they are and how they work.

The presenters of this report received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct an investigation into the patterns of utilization of the national television course, Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama. As instructional designers who participated in the development of the components of the national course, we were interested in the consequences of instructional design for program effectiveness, specifically looking at television as a means of providing students easier access to humanities instruction.

The investigation into the course usage and impact began in January, 1976, and is presently in process.

The most novel aspect of the Classic Theatre course was the process of delivery to institutions and local television stations and through them to the students themselves. The opportunity for drama and literature students to view plays and not just read them was also unique. We therefore chose to emphasize evaluation of these elements of the course.

THE COURSE

In the fall of 1975, the Public Broadcasting Service aired a spectacular series over almost all PBS stations. The series, Classic Theatre and Classic Theatre Preview: The Humanities in Drama, consisted of thirteen 17th, 18th, and 19th-Century full-length plays plus a thirty-minute preview for each drama. Included were such well known plays as Macbeth, The Wild Duck, and Mrs Warren's Profession, and two original screenplays, Paradise Restored and Candide. The plays were originally by the British Broadcasting Corporation and presented to American viewers by WGBH-TV in Boston. WGBH also conceived and produced the Classic Theatre Previews with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The purchase of the dramas themselves was funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the Mobil Oil Corporation.

The number of large organizations involved made this a complex and ambitious series even before educational institutions were added to shape the educational materials. The two higher education institutions were the University of California at San Diego Extension Division (UCSD) and the Coast Community College District (Costa Mesa, California). Working with WGBH, Little Brown and Co. (publishers of the course texts) and PBS, Coast and UCSD designed a college-level course around the series, promoted it to two-year and four-year institutions, and provided them with all course components.

The Classic Theatre course has three course goals for students:

1. Understand the social and historical backgrounds of the 17th, 18th, and 19th-Century European drama

2. Understand the origins, form, and literary importance of the classic works, leading to the viewing and enjoyment of the plays themselves

3. Learn some techniques of interpretation, analysis, and criticism of drama

On the surface these goals are not extraordinarily unique or nontraditional. The unusual component of these course, we believe, is revealed in the phrase "leading to the viewing and enjoyment of the plays themselves." Few traditional drama or literature courses offer the student the opportunity to view the plays being studied. Thus, the important quality of this course is that the student is a viewer of plays, not just a reader.

To achieve the course goals, students relied on the following materials:

Plays: The plays were chosen for their effectiveness on television as well as their significance in the history of theatre. They varied from 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours in length.

Previews: Preceding each play was a thirty-minute introduction to the plays. Each preview was produced by WGBH-TV, Boston, and featured an eminent scholar who commented on and interpreted the play, the playwright, and who discussed the performance with actors from the same play.

Anthology of Plays: an attractively-bound volume that included not only the texts of the plays but also informative introductory essays and illustrations for each play.

Book of Readings: The essays in this text were drawn together by Jonathan Saville, Associate Professor of Literature at the University of California, San Diego, after discussions with the editors of the anthology, production staff at WGBH, Boston, and after careful viewing of the productions themselves.

Study Guide: Authored by Dr. Henry Goodman, Professor of Theatre Arts at the University of California, Los Angeles, the study guide was the crucial

component for independent-study students because it directed them in how to view the plays and study for the course. Containing the specific instructional objectives and assignments for each unit, this book integrated all other course components.

Material was also produced to assist the colleges in offering the course. Each college participating in the project received an academic and administrative support package that contained a bank of test questions based on the course objectives, a faculty manual, recommendations for administration of instructional television courses, and promotional materials designed for local adaptation and use.

In short, the course was designed as a complex and complete learning system to be adopted by local higher education institutions for use primarily by the at-home student. It was also designed to be flexible so that it could be offered as a correspondence, independent study, or on-campus course, at the lower-division or upper-division levels, and from academic perspectives such as theatre arts, literature, or interdisciplinary humanities departments.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The Classic Theatre research project was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the national television course as a way to provide access to humanities materials. Our research design called for evaluating the effectiveness of the Classic Theatre course in terms of:

1. The attitude toward and utilization of course materials and prescribed format by participating institutions (two-year and four-year)

2. The response to the course by students and the extent to which the course reached a population not previously involved in higher education

3. Indications from both schools and students of further interest in this mode of humanities presentation

Information from participating institutions was gathered in the following ways:

1. Distribution of a questionnaire to all administrators of the Classic Theatre course

2. Distribution of a questionnaire to selected faculty facilitators and administrators of local course offerings

3. Site visits to selected schools to gather more in-depth information about the school, the community, and the students

Contact with students was made through a questionnaire that requested their reaction to the various course components, the administration of the course (including student support services, scheduling, etc.), and basic information about the students such as age, education, and study habits.

In processing the student information we have gathered, we hope to shed light on such questions as: Who are the students? What is their background in such subjects as literature and drama? Why did they enroll in the course? Has their interest in the study of humanities subjects been affected by this course? What are the characteristics of any new student populations that the course may have reached? What kinds of course promotion and publicity were most effective in reaching students?

We are presently approaching the end of the data-gathering phase of our study. Surveys have been sent to <u>all</u> institutions offering the course (153 two-year institutions and 122 four-year institutions) and to approximately 1,600 individual students from selected institutions. We estimate that the total number of students taking the course to be between 8,000 to 10,000. The overall institutional response rate to the initial round of questionnaires was 55 percent, which we feel indicates a high

degree of interest in both the course and in our research efforts. The rate of return of student questionnaires ranged from a low of 14 percent to a high of 60 percent of enrollments at a given school. The average rate of student returns was 37 percent.

We are, therefore, only at about the midpoint of our project, and we expect to complete the final report in the fall.

The completion of this study will close another stage of our lengthy and complex involvement with Classic Theatre, which began early in 1975 when we initiated discussion with representatives of the publishers and the public television system about the course materials.

DESIGN AND DELIVERY CONSIDERATIONS

The course actually evolved in two distinct stages, the first of which involved the conceptualization, design, and production of the course materials, and the second being the delivery of the total course package to institutions and students. Figure 1 below gives some indication of the complexity of the process, which involved an interesting array of institutions and organizations, each making an impact on the final look of the program.

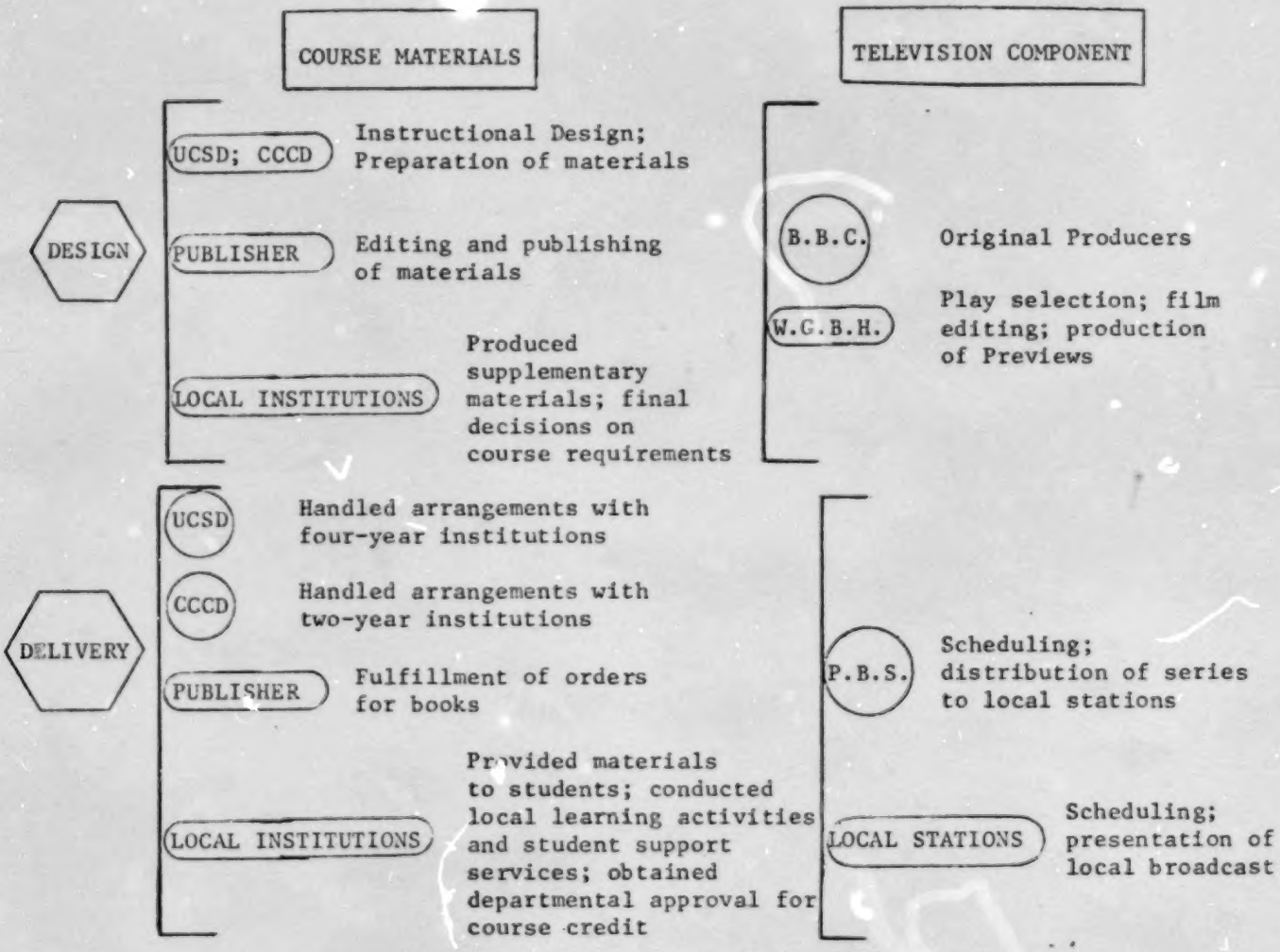
[Insert Figure 1 here]

The design phase involved all the decisions about course goals and objectives, types of books to be produced, the selection of writers and editors, contents and layout of the books and administrative and faculty manuals, and production of tests and promotional materials. Consideration had to be given to questions of differences in the needs of two-year and four-year institutions and students, and how to integrate all components of the course, some of which were not completed and were unavailable for

FIGURE 1

DESIGN AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama Television Course



review by authors and designers. For example, the decision was made that the study guide should attempt to provide learning objectives and reading assignments for introductory and advanced students alike, thus leaving to local institutions the selection of specific assignments. The design process required extensive communication between staff members at UCSD, Coast, PBS, WGBH, and the publishers.

The complexity of the design stage was paralleled in the delivery phase, particularly if we include the measures taken by local institutions and stations to implement the course in their respective communities. Several sets of mailings went from Coast and UCSD to the 275 institutions offering the course. Books had to be ordered from and delivered by the publisher to local institutions. Given the relatively short time for course delivery, a great deal of pressure was brought to bear on the process of getting materials out to local institutions in time for the broadcast of the first play in September, 1975. The lack of previous cooperation and communication between local schools and stations was one factor in the uncertainty of the delivery phase.

What distinguishes a national television course from other modes of instruction is the relatively heavy pre-design and pre-packaging of course content by several institutions. On the other hand, as Figure 1 illustrates, local institutions and stations made many critical decisions that determined the final look of the course in which their students participated. Thus, in the research effort we have found that the Classic Theatre course in which students enrolled at West Liberty State College (West Virginia), for example, differed substantially from the course of the same title offered at Chicago Inner-City Institute, although both utilized the same textbooks and television series.

Examination of the data indicates that the course was offered by a wide variety of types of institutions (two-year and four-year, public and private, liberal arts, comprehensive, and technical institutions) for a variety of credit options (credit/noncredit, lower/upper division, major/elective credit, etc.), on and off campus, with any number of special arrangements, e.g., closed-circuit television, two-way radio conversations, and discussion groups in students' homes. In some cases local faculty offered a full complement of lectures or seminars, while in other cases they added little or nothing to the information and instruction offered in the basic course materials and television programming. At some schools the entire course was implemented by a single instructor, and other schools involved everyone from the college president to the public information officer to a variety of academic departments.

Thus, our study has resulted in two significant findings to date about the process of this national television course: the complexity of the cooperative process of design and delivery, and the considerable diversity in local patterns of utilization of the curriculum. Both findings have serious implications for future design and use of these courses. They also make generalizing about our research data difficult, because before we can consider the course impact on students, we must consider the characteristics of the specific course in which a student was enrolled and must understand all the variables that affected it.

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

The variables affecting a local course offering can be seen by reviewing Figure 1. At any stage and in any organization shown in that diagram are factors that could alter the quality and shape of a local Classic Theatre course. First, consider the elements in the design phase:

1. The quality and appeal of the TV programs. Were the selected plays and previews interesting to students, especially to the introductory-level student? Or did students need to have prior experience with and appreciation of drama?

2. The quality and appeal of the print material. Was the format attractive? Was the reading level of the books below or above that of college-level students? Were the selections appropriate, interesting, and in a format conducive to easy reading?

Communication between the producing institutions (UCSD and CCCD) and local institutions reveals other variables affecting impact on students:

1. The delivery of course materials and information from UCSD and Coast to participating institutions. Did the college or university decide to offer the course in time to receive materials? Was the material sent? Did the local institution get the type of information it needed to offer the course?

2. Delivery of the books from the publisher to the schools. Given the very tight production schedule for the course books, the publisher had a very short time to receive and fill book orders. Late delivery of books to college bookstores could set students so far behind in studying that they might become discouraged and drop out of the course.

To these we can add a whole series of local factors:

1. Resources of the participating institutions to offering such a course. Included in this factor are financial as well as less definable resources such as enthusiasm and experience on the part of administrators and faculty members handling the course. For instance, could the school afford to provide a promotional campaign to recruit sufficient enrollment? Was clerical and other assistance provided to the faculty member? Was administrative assistance based on experiences and resources of an extension or correspondence division, or was the course the first of its type?

2. Local course characteristics and requirements. Was the student provided with lectures, seminars, or discussion groups? Were supplementary materials distributed by local faculty? How were the

students evaluated? How much and what kind of credit were students awarded?

3. The attitudes and level of understanding of local administrators and faculty. Here could be noted the importance of the attitude of the faculty member toward television as a method of instruction. The sympathy of the instructor to the problems of the correspondence student was another critical factor in the kind of support services provided students by a local campus. The availability of telephone advising, frequent mailed notices of newsletters, and optional study sessions were the kind of support needed by many students at both two-year and four-year institutions. Success in attracting students to this course also required more promotional effort than many schools were used to putting out. One community college administrator expressed the opinion that colleges should not have to "advertise" for students, an attitude that in part led to a poor promotional effort and low enrollment at that college.

4. The local PBS station. Did it offer the course? At reasonable times? Did it repeat broadcasts? Did it cooperate with local schools in matters of schedule and promotion? Was its broadcast frequency high enough to reach the school's district?

5. The resources of the student. Provided the course got to the local college and the programs got to the local station, were the students able to watch and profit from the programs? Did they have the reading ability and study skills to function as independent study students? Did they have a television set and did it receive the PBS station airing the series? Did they have the time and motivation to watch 2 1/2 hours of commercial-free and intensive television fare and to study several hours each week for thirteen weeks?

This is just a sample of the questions that could be raised at each step in the design and delivery of a national television course to students. These questions explain why no one course was like another and why general conclusions about the impact of the course on students are difficult to make.

Although UCSD and Coast were actively involved with coordination of all aspects of course design and delivery, no one organization or agency controlled all aspects. All producing institutions cooperated closely with each other and contributed unique resources and enrichment to the final product, but each controlled only a portion of the course. WGBH controlled the television programs, UCSD and Coast controlled the course descriptions and print materials, and PBS controlled television distribution. This lack of central control of the course components caused frustration to people at all levels of the project. Local faculty members were frustrated at not being able to have video cassettes to use in a classroom setting. Administrators were frustrated at not being able to influence the PBS broadcast schedule that, in some cases, did not correspond to academic calendars. And students, at the receiving end, had the least control of all; they could not negotiate course objectives or review programs before exams. In the face of this, it is amazing to consider the large number of institutions that offered the course, the students who enrolled and completed the course, and the great enthusiasm expressed by all participants for this new method of instruction!

CONCLUSION

From the point of view of the institutions that we represent, the evidence of the diverse patterns of utilization of the basic course

materials that we created and delivered is gratifying. The course was planned with flexibility in mind, specifying lower and upper-level objectives and study assignments, and offering much direct guidance to the student to free the instructor for many kinds of creative involvement and interaction. The diversity of usage leads us to conclude that it is possible to create course materials that are highly designed and packaged without the necessity of their being uniformly employed.

The significant opportunities for local faculty and administrative input seemed to largely counteract the "not invented here" syndrome reaction we often heard from faculty members. This finding should allay some of the often-expressed fears that the mass media will "homogenize" the educational process if used on a large scale. We have seen that television and print materials can be used in a manner that permits flexibility of usage and significant diversity in the learning experience and still provide unique and cost-effective education. We should strive to take into account this need for flexibility as we design and produce future national media courses. But we must also strive to simplify and streamline the communications between all entities participating in course development and also with local institutions. Locally, institutions can do much to enhance and alter national media courses to serve local student needs and to effectively use local resources. Attention must be paid at all levels to the role of local faculty members in facilitating student learning from this kind of instruction.

Television has found a new educational role in the Classic Theatre course and other recent national television courses. Rather than trying to do everything, in this course television was one part of a

multi-media package that was complemented by a variety of locally-originated activities. In evaluating the total learning experience for the student, we must direct our attention to all parts of the process of the course.

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